Weekly Copy Ps. 5 Annual Subscription Rs. 2

OPINION

Vol. XX 25th MARCH 1980 No. 47

THE PUBLIC VOICE

THE thin man in the long black coat and black cap, standing fifth from the head of the queue, with his eyes on the newspaper in his hand, heaved a deep sigh, and shook his head from side to side. His neighbour, the smart young secretary with the very impressive brief-case, looked in astonishment at him and said, "Are you ill? Or has some calamity befallen you that you sigh as if your heart would break?" "I sigh", said the thin man, "not for myself but for our whole country. I am personally in good heath, but the country, that's a different matter. Never was there a time when its mind was so sick as it is today, its condition more critical and dangerous," and the thin man sighed deeply again. "Much is undoubtedly wrong with our land, but this extreme view, I don't quite understand. Would you perhaps care to explain?" said the young secretary. "What is the worst thing that could happen to any country? Would you not agree it is loss of freedom? Freedom can be lost by external conquest or by internal tyranny," said the thin man. "External conquest is at the moment still not very near, though we have done much to encourage it. Internal tyranny is already in our midst and is working away every day to establish its dictatorial hold over us. The pity is most of us do not even see this is happening, and of such that see a very large number is indifferent. Apathy overcomes too many. Some may even agree they are being taken to hell in a handbasket, but they find it a comfortable means of progression, and haven't the will to struggle out of it. This then is our Indian disease. Would you not say it is a deadly one? May it not rightly evoke a sigh or two?"

"If your diagnosis is correct, it should evoke much more than sighs. Action, sir, action to counter the tyranny, would become compulsory," said the young secretary. "So let us see how valid this theory of the revival of tyranny is. You cannot deny that we are ruled today by a popular Prime Minister, who gained a very comfortable majority in the Lok Sabha elections only two months ago. There is some opposition to her in Parliament, but hardly strong enough to be significant. She can do almost anything she wants within the bounds of the Constitution, so why should she seek to be a dictator? Explain that first. Then, what evidence is there of her following the dictatorial line since the election? Are we just not frightening ourselves by evoking the shadows of the past? Before, she did it, therefore she will do it again."

"When you are bitten by the power-bug, you want not just power within limits, but absolute, boundless power, no restraints upon you at

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all. That is what has happened to our dear Indira. 'What I want is the whole law' is perfectly legitimate to her mind. That is the answer to your first question. It's no use saying to her, but you have ample power, why aren't you content ? If she chooses to answer frankly, she will say 'ample but not all, and between the two there is quite a difference'. As to your second question there is no lack of straws in the wind, from the N. K. Singh incident to the withdrawal from circulation of the Shah Commission Report. Why else the effort to restore the personnel of the Emergency to positions of influence and power, the attempt to make Delhi a personal fief of Sanjay's ?" said the middle-aged, pleasant-faced lady political scientist. "No, to anyone who has eyes to see, a mind to discern and a judgment to exercise independently, it becomes clear in what direction we are being silently and skilfully steered. The tragedy is that when our boat reaches destination, and we recognise where we are, it will have become too late to do anything."

"Surely, you exaggerate. Speech is free, the Press is free, there are no secret arrests, life goes on normally. So why raise bogeys ? I trust Indira, I think she means well by the country and its people, and I'm not going to be worried by imaginary fears," said a young man in blue jeans and green bush-coat. "A typical attitude," said the bespectacled economic journalist. "Tell me, sir, on the day before the Emergency was imposed in 1975, did you feel any special apprehension ?" "No, of course not," said the young man, "I only became aware of it, when a neighbour of mine disappeared from view for some days and on enquiry I was told by his wife he had been arrested under the maintenance of security law. I was puzzled for he was a thoroughly harmless fellow, but I later got to know that such things were happening fairly frequently, and it was best not to inquire. That couldn't happen now. Why, there is no MISA even in force." "And how long do you think it would take to provide that and other appropriate legislation, if the authorities thought it fitting to have them ?" asked the economic journalist. "A day for the President to sign an ordinance, so don't rely too much on that. My own feeling is that there's no doubt we are heading for a rule of absolute power. It may not even be necessary for the ruler to declare an emergency. With a compliant Parliament and a complaisant judiciary, she might well be able to manage without a formal declaration. You see, the Opposition is in great disarray. It hasn't even stopped splitting yet. In the state elections she has forced, her's will be the best organised and richest party, and she may well win all of them. In which case, the entire country will follow her ukases in matters big and small. So, she might not even need an emergency to enforce personal rule. When the legislatures are her creatures, the Judges follow her will and the President is quite amenable to her behests, what safeguards have the people ? Rule of the people, by her, for her, is likely thus to be established in the land. This I can see quite clearly. What is not equally clear to me is what should the ordinary person, you or I, do to prevent it ? That it is wrong, detrimental to the people's good, I have no doubt. Absolute power corrupts absolutely, and with it even a basically good person—few will

maintain our dear Indira or her beloved son are that—can turn into a monster, corrupt, cruel, vicious."

"The first thing to try to do, I should think, is to get rid of the apathy of the people. How does one do it? By taking every instance of abuse of power, explaining what it implies and awakening the people to it. Take the latest known instance the withdrawal from circulation of the Shah Commission Report, the perpetration of a very nasty piece of chicanery if ever there was one. Why is this being done? To draw a veil over the misdeeds of Indira, her son and her subordinates revealed there. The object is to wipe these out of people's minds, to make them non-events in fact. Let no one get a chance of knowing that Indira, faced with the evidence against her, refused even to make a statement. Let this abuse be the subject of conversation, let the Press deal with it extensively, hold if you can protest meetings about it, let everybody feel we're not totally indifferent to whatever wrong the dictator does, that in fact, whatever our negligence in the past, however many or great our failures, we are not depressed or finished. We are alive and awake. Once this feeling gets hold of even a section of the people, the disadvantages of dictatorship will become apparent. That it does not necessarily produce results the last two months under Indira have shown. Prices are higher than they were, crime has increased even in the capital, life generally is in no way easier for most of the people. Industrial trouble continues as before, the police are freeer in their use of strong arm tactics, the troubles in Assam instead of being settled or reduced, have come to a head, a retaliatory movement has begun in Bengal, all in all we're in a fine old mess, and the dictator, despite many assurances and numerous visits to holy men and institutions, can but look on and seek to consolidate her own power by many means, some straight, the majority devious. Let it also be felt that even if the men in the legislatures are subservient, at least a respectable number outside are not, and that they cannot be cowed by threats or bought by inducements," said a luxuriously-moustached, white-haired, khadi-clad old gentleman.

"All this needs organisation, where is that to come from?" asked the yong man in jeans and green bush-coat. "Why, from you young people," said the old gentleman. "You don't mean to say that with so many of you around, you can't put up a simple organisation! Not that an organisation is absolutely necessary. So long as people keep their minds clean and acute and see things as they are, tyranny with all its lures and punishments, can generally be resisted. Its success cannot over-awe them, nor blind them to its darker side. Finally, it may crush them, but then death comes sooner or later to every person, and as the song says 'What kind of plaint have I/that perish in July?/I might have had to die/perchance in June.' The spirit of man is unconquerable, friends. Let Indira see that by your acts, and thus have a chance to reform, if after all her visits to spiritual centres, the lust for power is slightly dimmed within her. Very unlikely, you feel, young lady" looking at the secretary, "you may well be right; I wouldn't disagree." "One objection to your proposal, of course, is that by showing that a section of opinion is openly

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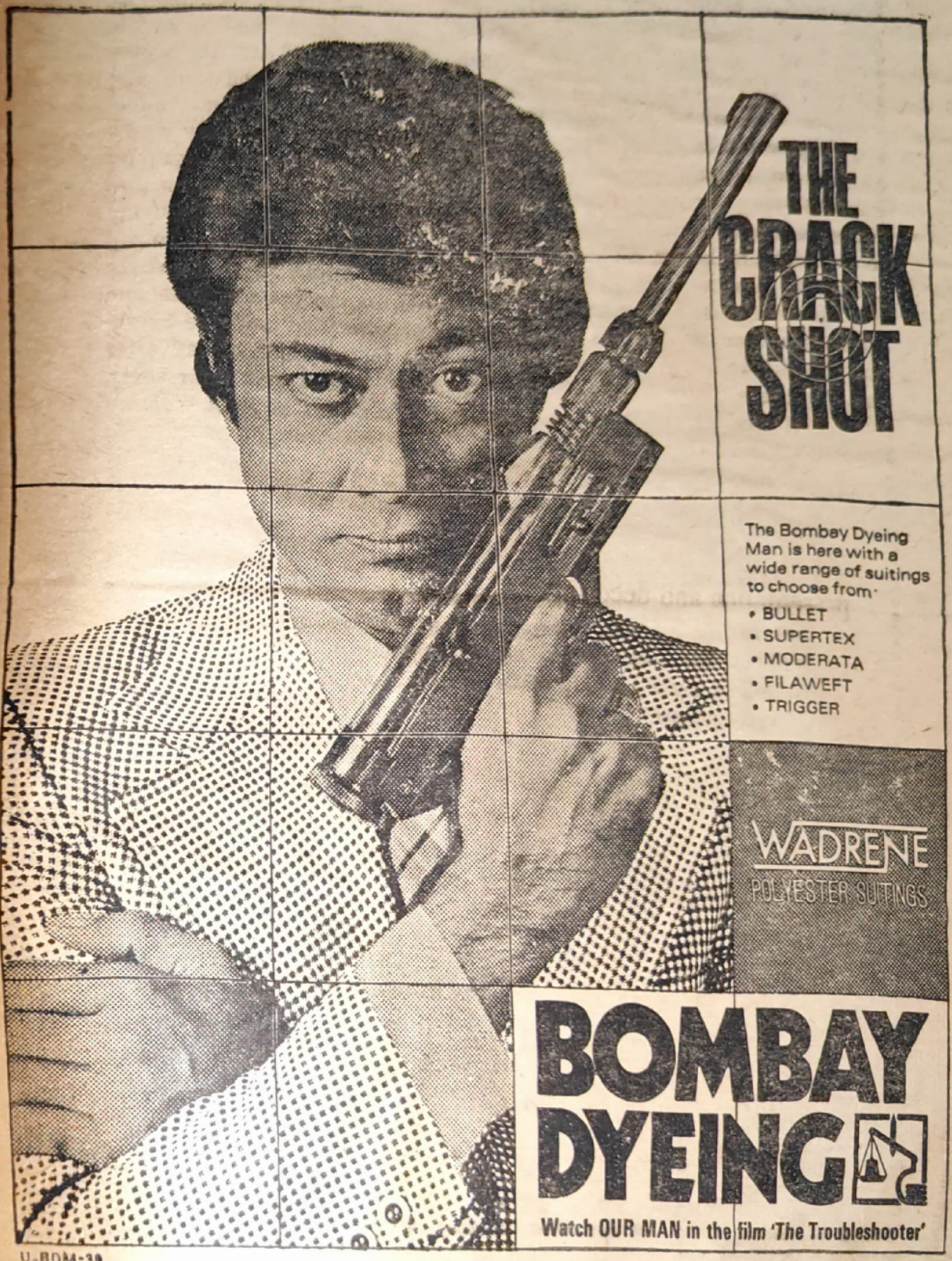
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opposed to tyranny and her, she may feel she must take measures at once to deal with it, and so the Emergency in full force may be upon us even earlier than otherwise, all the restrictions being imposed forthwith, instead of being kept in the background as at present," said the young man in jeans. "Well, that is so," answered a handsome young woman in a kaftan and embroidered slippers. "But do you know, sometimes I feel anything would be better than this period of transition ? It is very weary making, to go on from day today with the Damocles sword of tyranny hanging over your head. Since it is to fall, let it fall now quickly so that everyone knows exactly where she or he stands. For the liberty-loving too it might be better, before the long suspense has had a chance to sap the spirit. God alone is all-knowing, so they say; I wish He would share His knowledge on this point with me. Until one knows, one lives and works in a haze, so it seems to me." "I agree with you," said the Secretary, "better to know the worst than to have to anticipate it, day after day. Oh, here comes the bus." So they all got in and took their seats, many quite serious, reflecting on what must be a matter of great moment to them as to all their fellow-citizens.

"Yet not for power.
Power of itself would come uncalled for,
But to live by law, acting the law we live by
Without fear, and because right is right.
To follow right were wisdom in the scorn
Of consequence."

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Posted at Central Packet Sorting Office, Bombay on 25-3-1980
Regd. No. BYW 69
Licence No. 14. Licensed to post without pre-payment

Edited and published by A. D. Gorwala at 40C Ridge Road, Bombay 400 006 and printed by him at the Mouj Printing Bureau, Khatau Wadi, Bombay 400 004.
Proprietor : A. D. Gorwala.